

Board Meeting 18 September 2025

TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING HELD AT TOURISM NI HEADQUARTERS, LINUM CHAMBERS, BELFAST ON THURSDAY 18 SEPTEMBER 2025

Participating:

- Ms Ellvena Graham OBE (Chairman)
- Ms Aileen Martin
- Ms Áine Gallagher
- Ms Karly Greene
- Mr Ciaran O'Neill
- Mr Colin Johnston
- Mr John Hood
- Ms Linda MacHugh
- Mr Michael Counahan (by remote call)

In attendance:

- Ms Laura McCorry, Chief Executive
- Ms Áine Kearney, Interim Chief Executive
- Mr David Roberts, Director of Strategic Development (items 2 (i-iv))
- Mr Adrian Doherty, Director of Corporate Development (items 3 (iii) – 4 (iv))
- Mr Ciaran Doherty, Head of Regions (item 2 (i))
- Mr John West, Strategic Adviser to the Board
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

1. Introduction / Standing Items

The Chairman welcomed those present and asked for declarations of interest. None were declared.

1 (i) Minutes of Previous Meetings

Minutes were reviewed of the Board Meeting held on 13th August 2025. A minor amendment was requested regarding the destination marketing conversation (**ACTION:** JD).

1 (ii) Matters Arising – Actions from Previous Meeting.

The Board noted the status of action points in the action log. It was confirmed that the draft Corporate Plan that issued for consultation reflected recent input from the Board about the inclusion of high-level objectives and outcomes.

It was noted that respective roles and responsibilities of Tourism NI and Belfast City Council in relation to the Fleadh Cheoil had been discussed with the Board at a high level and was therefore complete on the action log. However, as more detailed discussions are still ongoing, the Board asked that an update be brought forward in due course.

The minutes of 26 June 2025 were approved.

2. Items for Discussion

2 (i) Destination Stewardship

Tourism NI's Director of Strategic Development and Head of Regions joined the meeting to present the findings of work carried out by Earthcheck on destination stewardship in NI. This is as per the required action in the Tourism Vision and Action Plan.

Members had a wide-ranging discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of the preferred approach and noted the need for endorsement from local authorities and businesses in the relevant destinations, as well as strategic alignment in due course with the brand experience work.

Whilst it was noted that destination stewardship formed part of the discussion at the Board's strategy away day, Members remarked that the Board should have been included as a key stakeholder and included in the early round of engagement sessions with Earthcheck.

Members asked to see the reports produced by EarthCheck and asked that the leadership team consider including key reports in the Board online resource library in future (**ACTION: DR**).

The Board approved the direction of travel and stressed the need for clear demarcation between the pilot programme and any future implementation phase. The Board asked to be kept informed as stakeholder engagement continues (**ACTION: DR**).

2 (ii) City & Growth Deals Updates

At its last meeting, the Board requested an update on the status of the City & Growth Deals programme. The Director of Strategic Development delivered a report that set out the position of each project.

Noting the red status of the Mourne Gateway and Gobbins Phase 2 projects, Members were advised that:

- Newry, Mourne and Down District Council are exploring alternative proposals which could make use of the £30m of City Deal monies previously earmarked for the project; and
- Mid and East Antrim Council are carrying out an extensive value engineering exercise and considering revising the scope of the project.

Members encouraged DR to work closely with the respective Councils to ensure they develop alternative proposals that deliver on the tourism benefits originally envisioned.

2 (iii) Proposed 2026 Board Meeting Dates

Dates for 2026 were agreed with a request that sub-committee meetings be held at least ten days in advance of Board Meetings, where possible.

It was agreed that the priorities for 'deep dive' discussions included ITOA, the Department for Communities and a presentation focused on hospitality, skills training and education. **(ACTION: ELT)**

Members asked for calendar invitations to be shared as soon as possible **(ACTION: EST)**.

It was also noted that a risk management workshop planned for the Board in September had been postponed and Members would be notified of new dates as soon as possible **(ACTION: AG)**.

2 (iv) Tourism Careers Programme

The Board's approval was sought for a business case that merged several industry development initiatives into a single package that included the Employer's Excellence Programme. Noting the importance the Department is placing on skills and employment issues, Members asked if a mechanism was in place to determine success and it was agreed that the evaluation arrangements should be added **(ACTION: DR)**.

The Board approved the business case noting they would still be required to approve budget allocation for the programme annually. The Board suggested that it would be useful to devote some future discussion to marketing vs programme investment, and the CEO suggested this is reviewed at the strategy away day or earlier when the overall CSR budget settlement is known.

3. Reports

3 (i) Chairman's Report

Members noted the Chairman's engagements since the last Board Meeting. The Chairman commented she was hearing a great deal of positivity from the industry when she attends tourism events. She highlighted the recent celebration event to thank those who had contributed to the success of The 153rd Open Championship at Royal Portrush and commented it was good to see the efforts of volunteers acknowledged in a meaningful way.

3 (ii) Chief Executive's Report

The Board noted the content of a joint report from the interim Chief Executive and the new CEO on emerging and ongoing issues.

The report included an update on Shared Island projects. The Board asked for further detail to be provided on the differentiation between the Shared Island Gobbins project and the City Deal investment for the same attraction **(ACTION: DR)**.

Members suggested that consideration be given to running either a tourism conference or tourism awards later in the financial year, resource permitting.

The new CEO thanked Board Members for their support during her on boarding phase and set out her key priorities for the coming months.

The Board warmly thanked Aine Kearney for taking on the role of interim Chief Executive during an intensely busy time, noting that she had also overseen delivery of the 153rd Open Championship during this period. In turn Aine thanked the Board for their advice and support.

3 (iii) Sub-Committee Reports

Reports were delivered by the Chairs of Tourism NI's Sub-Committees as follows:

Marketing Sub-Committee – At its meeting on 21 August the Committee had an introductory session with Tourism NI's new marketing delivery agencies. The Board stressed the need for the organisations to work closely together and to ensure appropriate oversight was in place to drive integration and collaboration to maximum effect. The Committee approved a report on a review of its own effectiveness, and this was provided to the Board for information.

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee – a detailed report was submitted to the Board following the Committee's meeting of 4 September. The revised Fraud Policy and Fraud Response Plan were recommended to the Board and approved. The Board sought clarity on the ability to delegate the approval of policies to the relevant sub-committees, except in instances where the explicit approval of the full Board is required. The Board asked the Corporate Services Director to review the Committees' terms of reference for this purpose and clarify **(ACTION: AD)**.

A draft of the 2024-25 Annual Report and Accounts had been reviewed by ARAC. A few minor amendments were suggested in the Governance Statement section of the draft accounts **(ACTION: CEO)**. The Board indicated it was content to delegate review of the draft Annual Report to ARAC, ahead of submission of the draft accounts to NIAO for audit.

The Board also reviewed the list of audit recommendations that remain open or in progress and proposed that all recommendations be collated in one place for ease of tracking and review. The Chair of ARAC noted the recent resourcing pressures and asked that assurance mapping be reprioritised **(ACTION: AD)**.

Reviewing Internal Audit Service recommendations, it was suggested that any recommendations pertaining to casework matters should also be flagged to the Finance & Casework Committee **(ACTION: AD)**. The Committee had also reviewed the risk register and advised that its planned risk workshop would be rescheduled.

The Committee also presented its Annual Effectiveness Report to the Board.

Finance & Casework Committee – the Committee met twice in the period since the last Board Meeting. On 13 August the group reviewed the Outline Business Case for Belfast Stories and met again on 3 September to review the finance report for Quarter 1 of the 2025-26 financial year.

The Board was advised that the Committee received several requests from the Quality & Standards Team to approve notices of refusal or revocation of certificates for visitor accommodation. They had requested additional detail to ensure the process was robust.

The Committee also presented a report on its annual review of effectiveness and recommended this to the Board.

4. Q1 2025-26 Performance Reports

4 (i) Operating Plan Performance Monitoring

The Board noted the report on performance against key indicators during Quarter 1. Members commented that consideration should be given to adjusting how the report is presented for the Board to enable a strategic assessment of overall performance. Members noted that a couple of the objectives appeared closer to red status than to amber and asked this be revised at the next quarter (**ACTION: AD**).

4 (ii) Risk Management

A report on the risk register was presented. Noting the content, the Board commended progress. Members requested a more strategic accompanying paper be presented that focused minds on any movement in the key risks and supporting mitigating actions (**ACTION: AD**).

4 (iii) Finance

A report on the status of Tourism NI's budgets at the end of Q1 was presented. The Board discussed the CSR bids and requested key messages be developed in support of the bids that demonstrate (for example) the potential impact of having additional resource available for marketing (**ACTION: ELT**).

4 (iv) People & Organisational Development

The Board noted the content of a report on HR and staff relations matters.

5. Items for Noting

5 (i) Market Outlook Update

The Board noted the content of a report on visitor trends.

5 (ii) Draft Agenda for November Board Meeting

The Board noted the proposed draft agenda for its next meeting.

5. Any Other Business

The Board was also advised that Members would soon receive a survey as part of a self-review of the Board's effectiveness and were asked to complete this expeditiously.

An update was given on the proposal to extend the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand into Northern Ireland. Members were advised that the All-Island Strategic Tourism Group is expected to meet on 24 September, with a formal announcement of the next steps to follow soon.

The Board also received an update on the Magee Expansion project. It was noted that Tourism NI had been asked to support this with a marketing campaign and that its ability to do so must be in line with our vires.

It was proposed to move the date of the December Board Meeting to the 10th.

As this was John West's final Board Meeting in his role as strategic adviser, the Chairman took the opportunity to thank him warmly for his contribution to the Board's work over the last two years and in his previous role as a Board Member.

The meeting concluded.

6. Date of Next Meeting

The next Board Meeting is due to be held on Wednesday 12 November in the Palace Demesne, Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon Council.